

I. F. Stone: A Weekly Gadfly Who Likes People and Angers His Readers

By ISRAEL SHENKER
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON—I. F. Stone is a radical journalist who cannot bear the thought of not knowing the worst about any situation.

He approaches outrages in six continents and outer space with the singular delectation of a gourmet finally tasting the ultimate cheese with the perfect wine.

The first person is writ large in I. F. Stone's Weekly, but the second person plays an important role as well.

"I'm gregarious, and strongly biased, and morally arrogant, and have strong views, and at the same time I like people of all kinds," the writer-editor-publisher said.

He is now going through an agonizing reconciliation to the Democratic exodus here.

"I don't think it's the end of the world," he said, and sighed. "Nixon is competent. He's not a monster."

Then Mr. Stone raised his voice: "But he just hasn't got it. He's a genuine Republican, and the genuine Republican is really a dull fellow. When it comes to a crisis he has only routine ideas."

"Khrushchev dealt with crisis by delivering his secret speech to the 20th Congress [of the Soviet Communist party], Pope John by calling the Vatican Council, de Gaulle by getting out of Algeria. All three knew how to break out, how to shake up a situation. Nixon doesn't."

He pursued: "Every country has two souls, good and bad. America's good soul is very responsive to suffering. A leader with courage and vision could evoke out of the orchestra of our American people the sounds of racial reconciliation. He must be a political Toscanini, but Nixon is tone-deaf."

An Independent Type

Liking people comes hardest of all in this capital, where Mr. Stone works at home.

"Most of the journalists," he says, "are like Izvestia or Pravda, regurgitating the same clichés."

What saves him from this is the practice of working independently.

"I'm not only independent of advertisers," Mr. Stone says. "That's easy. I'm independent of my readers, and that's difficult. Being dependent on one's readers is the subtlest kind of slavery. The real test of leadership is whether you're willing to take up causes unpopular with your readers."

"Even when I attacked [Senator Joseph R.] McCarthy, it didn't require any particular courage. What was McCarthy going to do to me? Expose me? It would be like exposing Gypsy Rose Lee. I was exposing myself every week anyway."

"There was no one who couldn't have been a little braver and a little freer, and he'd have made the country a little braver and freer."

Showing courage has earned him the devoted enmity of some of his readers.

He offended many with his attacks on the Soviet leadership.

"You can read all the books," Mr. Stone says, "but it hits you in Moscow—the provincialism, the prudery, the suspicion. Russian officials are just like those in the State Department—the same frustrating wooden Indians. You ask them questions, you don't get answers, you get a phonograph record—a quack quack."

Having read the report of the Warren Commission on its investigation of President Kennedy's assassination, he supported it.

"I'm against the conspiracy theory of history," Mr. Stone said, "and here you had three concentric circles of conspiracy to believe in. You had to believe in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, a conspiracy to kill Oswald, and a conspiracy to hush it up."

Lecturing the Intellectuals

"People are deeply superstitious and believe in witches and wizards. In America you have this attitude toward a handful of Communists, in the Soviet Union toward Trotskyists."

Having reported sympathetically on Israel's fight for independence in 1948, he was critical after the Arab-Israeli conflict last year.

"For me," he said, "the Arab question is the number one

Jewish question. How we feel toward the Arabs will determine what kind of Jews we are."

He angered many readers with a special issue a fortnight ago on the New York school strike.

"If this great city is to be saved from race war," he wrote, "more Jewish intellectuals are going to have to speak up in ways that their own people will resent."

Laying down the law to intellectuals comes naturally to this veteran of The Nation, the old PM and the old New York Daily Compass.

Today he reads voraciously in French and haltingly in German and keeps up with The Times of London and Le Monde and leading American dailies. He can even penetrate the darkest thickets of The New York Review of Books. He writes for it as well—and clearly, taking Curtis E. LeMay apart with gusto and putting Malcolm X together sympathetically.

"I always dream of an issue of The Weekly that will be like a soufflé," Mr. Stone says, "light, erudite, urbane, witty. It will sing, which is more than your French soufflés ever do."

Working against his culinary dream is the plethora of ingredients. One visitor suggested to Mr. Stone that he give up his concession to at least one country, so as not to feel duty-bound to have every political line-up in the batter. He brushed off the suggestion.

"There's so much to do," he agreed happily, "so much to learn. It's a 50-ring circus."

His View of Vietnam

When he returned from visiting the circus of Vietnam, he asked: "How do you fight a war in a peasant country on the side of the absentee landlord, with a Catholic legislature in a Buddhist country?"

"Since we are spending so much money on a military machine, the tendency in a crisis is to use it. Really to set another course is beyond the power of conventional politics. Once you have the big power you're going to blunder into another war. The next time it will be with Brazil or Liechtenstein."

Last year he was laid up for three months with a detached retina and what doctors mistakenly (says the patient) diagnosed as a heart attack.

To recuperate he took his wife, Esther (the Weekly's circulation manager and only other employee), off to Europe and spent the last night on the ship dancing.

"I asked a friend not to tell the 11-year-olds that I'd had my bar mitzvah," Mr. Stone recalls. "Modern music is so easy to dance to. All you need is neshumah [soul] and legs."

In London he looked around for an optometrist to test his vision and finally went to the Casino de Paris instead to try his eye on nudes.

"In Paris," he said, "if you want to look at nudes you go to the Concerts Mayol. In the afternoon it's full of zaidies with big pipicks [grandpas with big tummies] who look up at the girls with the air of connoisseurs—it's wine, it's cheese, it's girls."

In England It's So Furtive
"But in England, at the Casino de Paris, it's so furtive. When the girls went down the ramp one man pulled out The Times to read, as though he were in the British Museum."

"One of the girls called out, 'Is there anyboyd alive out there?'"

Mr. Stone modestly refrained from replying, perhaps because in Europe he is treated as a distinguished visitor and defender of the free press.

"When I started the Weekly in 1953," he says, "I didn't think it was going to last."

The initial circulation was 5,500. Subscriptions still cost \$5 a year even now that the Weekly appears only biweekly, to spare its boss. But circulation is now 45,000.

"Suddenly I've got a retirement fund," Mr. Stone said, aghast at success as he approaches the age of 61. "I've proved that free enterprise exists in America. You can sell anything."

Even Republicans like President-elect Richard M. Nixon must realize that their adversary is in the honorable tradition of the uncommon scold, for which there is still no cure short of silence.

"I've already evolved from a pariah to a character," the incurable critic said. "Soon people will look at Izzy Stone and say, 'You see, when we can tolerate a fellow like him, it's really a free country.'"